

Progress Report

by Child of Mars

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Summary: The story of Barney Calhoun, our favorite security guard, vent racer, Resistance spy, and all and out dweeb. Rated T for violence.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note: I have never really played Half-Life, but I've watched my brothers play it for hours at a time and I fell in love with the storyline. However, Barney, my favorite character, disappeared after a while! This story covers in detail bits and pieces of Barney's life that the game doesn't really explore. Furthermore, the title at the end of the original Half-Life game, "Subject: Barney Calhoun, Status: Out of Range, ect." really intrigued me.

This section deals with Barney from before and after the Black Mesa incident, before Gordon reappears. The next section will deal with Barney's fatal departure on the train, and my take on what became of him. Enjoy!

****Progress Report****

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Anderson, South Carolina

Status: N/A

Barney sat on the grass; arm wrapped around one knee, watching as Lauren talked animatedly about the things that made her happy. The sun, casting gold and red rays over the hills, the lake below, still blue and cool and sparkling, the green, sweet smelling grass on the hill, even the air, which carried the faint scent of wildflowers from the field behind them.

Barney just listened, and watched. He wanted to tell her the things that made him happy. Lauren's big green eyes, the way her brown hair ran down her shoulders and danced there with every movement she made, a perfect frame for her face. Her blushing cheeks, the blue jean skirt she was grinding into the hillside with her knees as she reached for the dandelion further along the lawn. Even the light blue blouse that she must have worn at least ten times out of a hundred dates. But especially her. Definitely, absolutely her. All those other qualities just contributed, just artfully covered her inner beauty. In fact, she seemed to beautify them, with her smile just making Barney's entire world go to pieces.

He wanted to tell her all this, but it somehow got stuck on his tongue and didn't come out all the way. So he just listened.

And then, noticing it was getting late, Lauren turned to him. "You're awfully quiet today. Something on your mind?" She sat back beside him, fingering the dandelion.

"Yeah." Barney answered after a few seconds, as if his speech was delayed. "I'm going back on active duty."

"Oh." Her face fell for a moment. Just a moment. "How long? When?"

Barney had joined the Secret Security Forces with excitement and adventure lust, eager to leave his hometown where nothing ever happened. Now, something had happened, something that made him actually wish he worked in a factory instead, if he could only stay. Lauren had happened. He twined his hand in hers. "May. New Mexico. Trust them to send me to one of the hottest states in summer." He tried for a joke, but the half smile fell off his face. "3 month shift, then 3 more at another research facility in Oregon."

"Ah." They were both silent for a while, she staring pensively at the ground, he searching her face anxiously for the emotions that fought behind it. Then Lauren looked up and grinned. "You'll be back in time for Christmas, anyhow."

Relieved and touched by her optimism, Barney let go of a breath he had been holding, grinning back. "Right! And for Christmas, I'll bring you some desert flowers. You know, the ones that can bloom even in winter? I'll hold em on my lap, all the way back!"

"Ha. You'll just drop them and break the pot." Lauren joked, hiding her real tenderness.

"Who said anything about a pot? I'm bringing you a whole boxful!" Barney flung his arms out wide to emphasize this.

"You dweeb." Lauren giggled, before flinging herself into his surprised embrace.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Black Mesa Research Facility, New Mexico

Status: In Queue

Engrossed in the radio program, Barney nearly splashed beer on the

young assistant who tapped his shoulder. "Whoa, kid! Don't sneak up on me like that! What's the fuss?" He felt less than sociable, having stayed up late last night with a few friends.

"Dr. Kleiner lost the key to his office and he can'tâ€|"

"I'm on it!" Barney interrupted him, dropping his beer almost clumsily on the table and leaving his helmet. He sprinted away, calling over his shoulder, "Wait a few seconds before telling Dr. Freeman, won't ya?"

"Nice try." Gordon met him at the corridor, grinning.

"Every little bit helps." Barney made a face and then ran to an air duct, lacing his fingers through the grate and tugging hard. After a few seconds, it came away with a clang and Barney fell on his backside.

Gordon had his open first and was crawling inside. Barney shot into the dark, narrow chamber, every part of him wriggling and pulling and pushing, all the while ignoring Dr. Kleiner's thin complaint as it floated through the air. "Really, I hate to put you two through so much trouble, though indeed I think you bring most of it on yourself by racing like this. There are countless bacteria and mold species growing in those air ducts that you could easily breathe in by stirring up the sediment in your harried mode of travelâ€|"

Mercifully, the doctor's voice grew too quiet to hear.

After a few minutes, Barney saw light ahead. Ka thunk, ka thunk, went his back against the roof of the vent. He began pushing down on it steadily.

A dark haired head appeared below. Gordon!

With a sudden, frantic lunge, Barney smashed the vent into pieces. Unfortunately, his momentum pulled him down as well, causing Gordon to be showered with plastic shards and than crushed by Barney Calhoun.

Amidst the wreckage, someone twitched. Then someone moaned.

There was a knocking from the door. "Gordon? Barney! What's happening in there? If you've broken my Clip Lamp again I swear I'llâ€|"

Barney sat up gingerly, one hand gently prodding his side. "Oww."

Gordon pushed Barney off him and reached below himself. He pulled out the Clip Lamp, which was now cracked in one of its un ducktaped places. Both men looked at each other.

"Wellâ€|you better let him in." Barney gestured.

"You fell on me. YOU let him in." Gordon retorted.

Barney relapsed into reluctant silence. Both men sat a little longer, listening to the protests of Dr. Kleiner, which were slowly growing

louder and more vehement.

"We are the only guys in the complex who don't mind crawling through the Doc's vents, right?" Barney said after a while.

"I think so."

"That's some insurance. And it's not like we've never done this before." Barney touched the broken place on the lamp, which was still held in Gordon's fist. The other half of it promptly fell off and landed with a dull clang.

Both men cringed at the sound. Gordon picked up the broken piece and tried to fit it back on. Barney, struck with inspiration, pulled out one of the dressers in the desk and pushed the lamp deep inside. Both men picked up the papers that were scattered on the floor and layered it over.

"I'm going to get security! Really, this is most outrageous!" Dr. Kleiner's protests were cut short as the door swung open. He nearly fell over with the sudden imbalance, but when he looked at Barney and Gordon's' pasted smiles, he nearly fell over again.

He rushed past them and frantically scanned his office. Nothing ripped, smashed, or broken. Just a few crumpled papers. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, everything's intact for once. Thank yo!" He suddenly noticed something that wasn't quite right. "Wait, where's my Clip Lamp?"

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Black Mesa Research Facility, New Mexico

Status: Out of Range

Barney stumbled slightly as the portal energy around him died away. Dr. Rosenberg was shaking visibly, leaning heavily on his colleague, Dr. Stafford. Barney fingered his arm curiously, feeling something like static electricity still fuzzing over him.

Several other scientists and security guards clustered together, blinking in the sudden, bright sunlight.

"Hey, Doc Rosenberg, any idea where we are?" Barney asked suddenly, worried about their proximity to the Black Mesa Research Facility. Not that he was nervous about the millions of zombies, head crabs, Vortigaunts, and other creepy, slimy, killer creatures back there. Or even the giant hooks coming out of the ground or the military troops and assassins sent in to slaughter the entirety of the Black Mesa personnel.

One thing was for sure, Barney reflected, remembering the strange purple sky, floating rocks, and overall alienistic planet of Xen, _I'm never gonna laugh at Sci-Fi movies again._

"Not exactly. We should be any where in a radius of 14 miles from Black Mesa."

"That means we could reach a road anytime between three hours hiking or two days!"

"Correct, I'm afraid."

Barney said nothing, merely contenting himself with being alive. He checked his pistol. A few shots left, just in case those marines tried to follow them. Now that Barney was out of that infested nightmare, he wasn't gonna die now.

He turned only once, watching the smoke and strange blue lights, far away on the horizon. More than a hundred people had died. And Gordonâ€|Gordon had been at the heart of it. Dr. Kleiner, Dr. Vance, his baby daughter Alyx, the darling of the complex, his wife Elaine. They were probablyâ€|all gone.

He clenched his fist a moment, cursing the whole, decrepit, rundown system that caused this, praying for lost friends, as images of them rose up in his head, perhaps never again to be beheld by his naked eye.

He looked back. Being the only security officer to survive from the Center Labs, as well as the only man to enter Xen, and come back alive, he was unanimously elected the leader. He looked at the motley group, blistering under the sun.

_I'll get them out alive. _He vowed. _For you, Izzy, Gordon, Eli. I'll get them out._

"Ok." He spoke, feeling his voice sharp and commanding. "Let's march!"

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: United Nations Hall, New York

Status: Located

Barney yanked a dead Policeman off a barricade, dodging bullets as he snatched out the cop's rifle. He dropped his own useless weapon and layed away at the enemy as they stormed over. Vortigaunts made mincemeat out of the defenders with their electric barrage. The Striders above were practically destroying the very buildings they walked by, while Copters chopped into the humans as they dive-bombed over, shooting a strange plasma weapon that incinerated anyone unlucky enough to be in range.

As if all those slimy creeps weren't enough, now the entire Earth was being invaded by some sort of force that called itself the Combine. It had been almost seven hours since the war began. According to Dr. Kleiner, the Combine had been attracted here by the Portal Storms.

Barney almost smiled. He had discovered the Doc alive, protesting as usual about the scant space in the evacuation units. He had almost wrapped the horrified Doc in a hug, which would have resulted in them both being coated in dirt and alien blood.

And what was better, the Doc had informed him of the survival of Eli and little Alyx.

There was only one friend still missing, one Barney had no hope for.

Gordon.

He sighed. In that moment of dejection, he let his guard down and bit down a scream as a bullet tore into his arm. He dived down behind the barricade, holding the gun awkwardly with his elbow as he examined the wound. Not too bad.

Suddenly, a voice rang out.

"Attention, defenders of Earth. This is Dr. Breen. Please, lay down your arms. You can see for yourself the situation is hopeless. Really, this is one of those times when discretion is the better part of valor. I have been engaged in conversation with the Combine Leaders. While they may seem brutal to you, I assure you that you have only seen their stern, judicial side. They have another side, a side of benevolence and generosity. They have come to help, not destroy us. We are leaving them no choice by this insistent bloodshed! As has, unfortunately, been the usual case with our ancestors, we have reacted with violence and distrust. The Combine have come to raise us up out of ignorance and turn our faces to the stars. Now, as the new Representative of the Earth government, I tell you to lay down your arms. Forget anger, and enter a new world of technology and wonders."

Lots of people stared in amazement, first at the broadcasters, than at each other, unsure. Most of them cast down their guns or came out from hiding, clustering in timid groups under the Stalkers. A few others yelled angrily, shaking their fists and screaming out defiance. Barney was one of those.

He reared up. "Are you crazy! The Combine came here with no warning and slaughtered an unaware humanity for four hours, than fought us another three! They didn't even announce themselves! I've heard better speeches from Adolf Hitler, _Breen_" He nearly spat out the last word. That slimy little bureaucrat had just sold his planet, his people, for that irresistible position of Ruler of Earth.

He jumped on top of the barricade, raising his gun on high. "Who's for Combine slavery? Stay with them! Whoever's for Earth, with me!" And he blew both barrels of his gun into the speaker nearest him. It exploded in sparks.

A crowd of people rushed towards him, whooping. The striders turned, standing over their new slaves, in order to fire killing blasts at the rebellious ones. Dozens fell dead in the streets. But Barney got some of them out. He always got someone out, as if to make up for the one person he had lost.

Lauren.

He hadn't seen her, hadn't heard from her, couldn't even go look for her. Despite the fact that she was everything in the world to him, he knew there would be no more world unless everyone fought their hardest, and sacrificed the most.

When he slept, he dreamed of dandelions. He dreamed of a hillside, and desert flowers. He heard her voice, beautiful, "You dweeb." And felt her arms around him. And then he woke up, and fought.

And the Resistance began.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Five miles outside City 17

Status: In Queue

"You sure this is gonna work? I'm not gonna come back looking likeâ€¦like scrambled eggs, right?" Barney eyed the teleport mechanism distrustfully.

Dr. Kleiner looked up from some adjustments he was working on. "Well, theoretically, there's a 36.2 % chance you will return with some physical disorientation."

Barney backed away from the machine. "Doc, I'm not too keen on that. I really, really wouldn't like that."

"Exactly why I've located a test subject." Dr. Kleiner pointed at a carrier. "Take it out and put it in please."

"What?" Barney bent over and peered through the grating. A green eyed cat, its fur a mottle black and brown, peered back at him. Bad mood if he ever saw one. He opened the grating and gingerly reached in, feeling for the scruff. When he finally found it and dragged it out, the cat transformed into a living garbage disposal, making quick work of Barney's hand and sleeve.

With a few bad words and even more exclamations of pain, Barney dropped the thing into the transporter. It stopped yowling and crouched at the very back of the transporter, quivering with rage.

Barney squatted down, looking at the cat eye to eye. Green, bigâ€¦they reminded him of Lauren. This cat couldn't really be blamed for its nasty attitude. It had been nearly 15 years since the Combine took over, and this cat was just a scared refugee, like any human at the moment.

"Hey Doc, does this cat have a name?"

"No." Doctor Kleiner had probably barely understood the question, engrossed as he was in his work.

"I'll call her Lauren." The words were out before he realized it. Dr. Kleiner glanced up sharply, and Barney wondered if he had ever mentioned Lauren to him over one too many beers.

If he did know, however, the Doc gave no indication and walked up beside him, pulling the levers and setting the coordinates. "Ready, Eli?" He spoke into the radio.

"Ready on this end." Dr. Vance answered.

"Alright. Transportingâ€¦now!" Dr. Kleiner pulled hard on a lever.

Barney stood well back, arms crossed, watching as the strange, floating blue shields whirled around the cat, faster and faster, until the cat itself could only be discerned by its bright green

eyes. Barney got an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach.

Suddenly, there was nothing.

"Have you received it?" Dr. Kleiner asked the radio.

"The cat's safe and sound." Eli grinned. Barney breathed out in relief.

"Now let's try a return path. Ready on this end to receive."

"Alright. Transportingâ€¦now!"

The blue glow started up again, shields whirling. But something was wrong. A strange, throaty sounding scream built up, and Barney nearly screamed himself as blood began to spray out of the transporter and onto the walls, the desks, and Barney.

"Something's going wrong!" Kleiner cried, trying in vain to correct the process.

Then, the shields dropped. Barney felt sick, very sick. He stared with wide eyes as Laurenâ€¦the catâ€¦swayed on bone legs. Guts were dripping and hanging out of different areas, the cat's face was unrecognizable. Barney couldn't even find it. The brain was flat, the tail was gone, and there was so much blood. But was really horrifying was that it was still alive. Barney could see the lungs shaking, breathing, somehow.

He couldn't bear it. He yanked out his pistol and fired round after round into it, not daring to stop until the thing stopped quivering, spread out flat on the floor of the transport. He stared at what had just been a living creature.

"Howâ€¦unfortunate." Kleiner muttered, looking a little green.

"Izzy! What happened?" Eli's voice came, worried.

"I don't think you really want to see." Dr. Kleiner said wearily. "Let's just say we've had a minor setback."

Barney almost lost it. Almost. He ran outside, totally disregarding the threat of Snapper Bots, or Civil Protection. He just needed air, room to breath, something to help him forget what he had just seen. Unfortunately, he'd never forget.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: City 17

Status: Selected

Barney felt his heart beating against his ribs, his tongue tight and dry, as he filed in with several other humans into the Civil Protection Center.

"You. Stand over there." Combine directed them all against the wall.

The clang of the door locking sounded like a jail door slamming. Barney gulped and raised his hands as each person was searched for weapons. He almost winced as a hand went over his face. Only recently an antlion claw had scarred him there. Luckily, the Combine Inspector chose not to question him about it.

Finally, the Inspector began asking them questions, showing no clue in his bearing as to whether the answers were true or false. Barney had no idea if he had failed or not. The questions were about their lives, their occupations, what they thought of the Combine, and what their interests were.

The Inspector walked towards one of the five Combine guards and pointed at four of the human beings. The guard shot every one dead. Obviously, their answers had been unsatisfactory. Barney was surprised, somehow expecting himself to be among the fallen.

Only Barney and one other human had been considered worthy to join the Transhuman Forces.

Barney followed the guards into the Memory Replacement Room. He watched as they took off the shirt of his companion and strapped him in. When his turn came, he waited till they were occupied, one with tying down his legs, the other with turning on his companion's apparatus. With a sudden, almost silent movement, Barney spat something out of his mouth. With a tiny click, the thing hit into the helmet waiting above Barney and stuck there, glowing a dull red.

The Combine officer stood up, crushed Barney's chin in one hand, and shoved down the helmet with the other.

Barney closed his eyes, praying as he had never prayed before that Dr. Vance's device would work, that it would deactivate the mind-wiping machine. He heard a lever grate in a socket, felt the helmet get warm, than hotter and hotter.

He concentrated hard, searching for everythingâ€¦_Maâ€¦South Carolinaâ€¦Lamarraâ€¦.Gordonâ€¦Laurenâ€¦wildflowersâ€¦.Breenâ€¦Headhumpers...Zombies...Combine..._

And suddenly, after a few, agonizing minutes, it was over. The helmet came off and Barney felt cool air brush his face. He realized he still remembered everything and opened his eyes, jumping for joy inside, but schooling down his face as the Combine wordlessly handed him his new uniform.

He was accepted into Civil Protection Squad.

to be continued

2. Chapter 2

_Author's Note: Sorry the chapter is so small...I just wanted to play on the suspense a bit. _

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Train Station 813E, City 17

Status: Accepted

Barney leaned against the train rail, looking down fondly on his two friends, Gordon Freeman and Alyx Vance. They had agreed to find another train, taking the ease off some of the space for the evacuees.

They would all meet up at the Woodlands Base.

He grinned down at Gordon, shaking his head inside. Gordon had not only survived that blast, but he apparently hadn't aged for twenty years. Now, if that wasn't fair, Barney didn't know what was.

He wanted to tell them that he wished them luck (he was no fool, he saw the way they looked at each other), that he was overjoyed to see them back safe, that he looked forward to paying Gordon back that beer, that he wanted them to take care of themselves, but as usual, all he wanted to say didn't come out.

So he said it all, very simply. "I'll see ya when I see ya." And waved at them.

Gordon grinned. "You too."

"See ya later, Barney. Take care!" Alyx called.

And they waved. They kept waving until the train was far, far out of site, until Barney reluctantly watched them dwindle into tiny dots on the horizon.

All was fine after that, except for a lack of elbowroom and panic attacks whenever they heard a rumble around the next hill. Everything was so fine, in fact, that Barney found time to look out the window and relax.

Which was even better, considering that he suddenly noticed the broken tracks ahead.

"Stop the train!" He jerked up, roaring, crawling and scrambling and kicking through the crowd of rebels. "Stop the train! Broken track!"

No one heard, maybe because everyone started screaming and panicking.

A terrific roar, and then a jolt that normally would have sent Barney into the next world. This time, however, he merely collided hard with the wall.

Everything was silent, dead silent, when Barney opened his eyes. He stood up, and saw with no little trepidation that everyone was still crouched, frozen, on the floor, mouths and eyes open, hugging each other, praying, looking out the window.

Alright. I didn't drink anything. I must be dreaming. Barney pinched himself, hard. Nothing happened.

"No, you are notâ€|asleep, Mr. Calhoun. Not in theâ€|clinical sense."

Barney looked to where the voice was coming from and nearly pinched himself again. He was seeing the same suited, green-eyed man he had seen once at Black Mesa. "Who are you?" He snapped distrustfully, reaching for a gun on his belt that had somehow vanished.

"Let's just sayâ€¦I'm a go-between, a businessman. Youâ€¦Mr. Calhoun, you were unfortunatelyâ€¦lost to usâ€¦before we couldâ€¦properlyâ€¦access you. During the Black Mesa Incident, my employers wereâ€¦observing the events with interest. Three particularâ€¦subjectsâ€¦were outstanding in theirâ€¦performance. Alan Sheppard, Gordon Freeman, andâ€¦yourself."

"What? What do you mean? Who are these employers? Some whacky government program?"

"That information isâ€¦classified. But understand, we operate outside time and space. We employed Gordonâ€¦and planned to employ you."

"So you're the reason Gordon reappeared so suddenly, not looking a day older! What did you do, pull a Rip Van Winkle on him?" Barney felt the urge to step forward and punch that sallow yet fascinating face, to make up for a little of the anxiety and loss he had suffered from for twenty years.

"He wasâ€¦suspended. Until we needed himâ€¦again. I'm offering you the sameâ€¦job."

"What, and wake up twenty years later to do whatever the heck you want me to? I don't think so!" Barney snapped.

"I'll give you aâ€¦choice, if you can call it that. This train, and all the souls aboard, can be saved. If you refuse, I can simplyâ€¦let time flow again, and everyone here willâ€¦die. If you accept, I will save everyone." The G-Man reached down and brushed some hair away from the face of a young woman. "Look at her. Only twenty-six years old. She lost her parents, and her young husband died in her arms. Must sheâ€¦join them?"

Barney's fists clenched. Of course, he knew what he would 'choose'. Even if the girl hadn't suffered such losses, Barney knew he would give up his life and even his liberty to save these people. There was no choice. The long and short of it was, he was being pressed into slavery.

"Youâ€¦" He was going to spew out a million names, none of them bad enough for this little god-playing G-Man, but he gave up, somehow realizing all his abuses would only slide off the G-Man, merely amusing him.

So he took a deep breath, looking at all the people, at the last of the Resistance. He was being taken away, before he could even see the cause he had worked so hard for succeed. Not fair. But_ at least, at least,_ he amended, looking down at all the frozen figures, _they'd all live to see it._

"You win." He growled. "If you keep your side of the bargain."

"I never break myâ€¦word, Mr. Calhoun."

And then, Barney faded with the G-Man into darkness. Time restarted. The screaming recommenced, a frantic struggle at the controlsâ€|but nothing happened.

Humming and chugging as if it had not just been tipping at an acute angle, the train zoomed on.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: N/A

Status: Employed

(i)(i)

Subject: Gordon Freeman

Location: Woodlands Rebel Base

Status: Dispossessed

Gordon felt Alyx shift beside him as Dr. Rosenberg's report continued. In his own opinion, Alyx had handled the death of her father with admirable courage. She wept alone, in bed, the first few nights after. She threw herself into her work with a ferocity that worried Gordon at the same time as it thrilled him.

It had been almost four months since the destruction of City 17. Hearing of the success, Rebel supporters were flooding in from all over the Earth. India, parts of Russia and China, most of Europe, and half of America were completely free of Combine influence, while millions of the ever present Xen creatures were being destroyed every day.

Gordon looked wryly at Lamarr as he thought of this, not able to find it in himself to love the nasty creature whose kin were even now turning innocent humans into zombies. He'd never say this aloud, however, partly as he knew it would do no good, and partly for Dr. Kleiner's sake. Barney was much more outspoken, however.

Thinking of Barney, Gordon remembered he had disappeared. He frowned thoughtfully, ignoring the scientists as they rattled on. The evac train had come in, safe and sound, with piles of the old Underground Resistance coming through. Barney had been on the last train, they all said, and then nothing.

It was possible, some theorized, that he had been flung out the window when the train pitched. But Gordon knew Barney. He would never be caught like that. An uncomfortable pit had grown in his stomach, and kept growing. Was this what Barney felt for the last twenty years? The thought that your best friend was gone, but you didn't know if he was alive or dead, or if he'd come back or not.

I'll see ya when I see ya.

Gordon sighed. Everyone halted their discussion and looked at him. "Something wrong Gordon?" Alyx asked, a little impatient yet curious.

"No. Can we please cut to the chase and discuss the recent victory

over the Combine Headquarters in California?"

"Ah, good idea!" Rosenberg exclaimed. "We've been sent some live footageâ€¦make a very good rallying logo, I think."

Alyx rolled her eyes, making Gordon smile.

He tensed just a tiny bit as the lights all went off, remembering the sewers, and the zombies, the moans, and the stenchâ€¦

But then the screen sputtered to life in light blue. Gordon, seeing dozens of good kids being slaughtered by the Combine security system in front of the gate, suddenly wished he had been there, somehow thinking he could have evened the odds.

Just then, someone broke from the cluster that was assaulting the walls. He ran around, smashed through a Combine platoon with the aid of a shotgun and two grenades, and then jumped on some barrels, dragging himself over the wall.

He was out of sight for a while. More Combine came up to the gate behind the sentry guns and began firing at the Resistance, adding more kills to the list.

And then, an explosives barrel rolled into their midst. One of the Combine, speaking frantically, fumbled to push it away. But the ping of a bullet ran out, and the gate erupted in flames.

It was a few minutes before the fires died down. The figure seen earlier rushed up to the gate and hacked into the code, before pulling the gates back. He was closer, and Gordon noticed he was wearing Combine armor. The Resistance flooded in for an attack charge. The Combine in the windows began to fire downâ€¦

"Stop!" Gordon yelled sharply, causing Lamarr to hiss loudly and Dr. Rosenberg to jump. Gordon leapt up. "Rewind!"

They pulled the film back until the strange figure was opening the gate, his face in a halfway profile. Gordon stepped up slowly as Alyx stood behind him with a gasp, realizing what she saw.

Gordon put a finger on the bluish screen, just under the figure. "It's Barney." He said softly.

to be continued

3. Chapter 3

Author's note: Ok, *looks at shamefully long hiatus on this story* I suppose that's enough suspense. Final chapter after this one.

Subject: Gordon Freeman

Location: Woodlands Rebel Base

Status: Dispossessed

Gordon stood behind Alyx, watching as she collected all possible data

from important events since Barney's disappearance. Alyx wiped her hair from her forehead and began reading aloud. "A figure in Combine armor was seen at the Paso Robles eventâ€|he took out two Striders before leading a squad through to the Combine Power Station. He disappeared afterwards. Seen again two weeks later, rescued the plans for an Energy Cannon and turned them in to Resistance Scientists before informing Dr. Midrench about the Combine plans for opening another portal to Xen."

She began scrolling again. "He appeared a month later in time to go on a one man mission into Fort Leanderâ€|blew up the entire place while still insideâ€|. sounds like Barney alright. He should have been dead, but they found him wandering along the Florida beachside only slightly singed."

Alyx gestured at the screen. "I don't understand this. Barney's been all over the map at just the right moments. With travel modes as they are, I don't believe he possibly could have! Why hasn't he sent us any word, anyway? And how the heck did he get out of that train? Why didn't he tell us?" Her voice dropped to a sad whisper. When she first met Barney, she had been a toddler in Black Mesa, basking in the adoration of her parents and most of the staff around her, but especially the two young men who visited her Dad so often.

Alyx squealed with delight when the door swung open. Barney and Gordy came in, both of them carrying heavy boxes for Daddy. Barney grinned when he saw her and added his load to Gordon's, leaving his friend to carry the boxes by himself as Barney crouched to be on eye-level with Alyx. "Hiya, sweetie. Lemme seeâ€|.what have I forgotten?" He began to search his pockets. Alyx laughed as his hands kept brushing over the bright candy stick that protruded from his chest pocket. Finally, she lost patience and snatched it, stuffing the thing into her mouth.

Barney sat back on his heels and watched her devour the red treat with gusto. After a few minutes she looked up and saw his kind eyes smiling at her. With a spitty, "Wuv oo Bawnee!" She threw herself into his arms, smearing sticky candy on his neck.

Gordon interrupted the scene. He kicked Barney lightly. "Hey, thanks for the help." He said sarcastically. "Now why don't you let me play with Alyx while you do some work for once." Gordon jerked his thumb at Eli, who was laughing.

Barney winked at Alyx and stood up, Gordon kneeling down to take his place. Pleased with either, Alyx grabbed his big hand in hers and tugged steadily; wanting to show him a new robotical toy her father had made for her.

Alyx wiped the starting tears from her eyes, feeling Gordon giving her a supporting squeeze on the arm before leaning towards the screen in thought, looking at the grid that showed Barney's tracks.

He noticed there was no pattern in them at all. Barney seemed to have somehow zipped all the way from California to Florida and then on a whim taken an excursion to Mexico. There was a possibilityâ€|

He shook that off. He didn't need everyone else going crazy, seeing the G-Man as he did. He was still unsure that he didn't have a mental disorder. But in the meantimeâ€|

"I'll pass the word out for everyone to keep an eye open for Barney. With luck, he'll probably appear again." Alyx superseded his idea.

"And meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, we keep on working." Alyx punched in some commands on the computer before turning and pointing. "That head humper is getting on my nerves!" Her face flushed with anger, perhaps remembering how much Barney hated it.

Gordon gingerly grabbed Lamarr's two front legs and deposited her into an airduct.

Dr. Rosenberg came in, followed by Dr. Kleiner, who was beaming. "I heard the broadcast you put out! Barney's alive? Wonderful!" He came forward. "I always said the Combine would have to hit him with the equivalent of 400 tons before he'd lie down on the job!"

Alyx and Gordon groaned at the awful pun.

Subject: Gordon Freeman

Location: City 24

Status: Dispossessed

It was over three weeks later before they saw him again. It all happened so fast. Alyx fell off the edge of a crevasse as the cavern, once an underground Combine base, rumbled. As she shrieked aloud, feeling nothing beneath her feet, Gordon grabbed her hand.

Somehow not getting shot as Combine on the other side fired rounds of plasma at them, Gordon pulled Alyx up. She sat on the edge, gazed over at the other side, and grabbed his shoulder. "Gordon! There!"

Gordon looked up sharply and saw him, leading another Resistance group up the other side, slaughtering the Combine as they raced at the final stronghold.

"Hey! Hey! Barney!" Gordon yelled, standing up straight and waving his gun.

Busy sending a Combine soldier into the next world with his rifle butt, Barney glanced toward the sound of his name, which he miraculously heard over the battle din. His face flooded with joy and he grinned at them, waving.

Next minute, a red, glowing grenade soared through the air. Giving Gordon an apologetic glance, he dove into the crowd. An explosion sounded, leaving several Combine and Resistance dead.

"Zombies!" A cry rose up. Gordon twisted around in time to avoid a head crab. The explosion had woken up a nasty crowd of them. By the time he and Alyx and their squad were finished, Barney and his troop were gone, pushing the assault deeper into the base.

Gordon didn't see him again.

Subject: Gordon Freeman

Location: Woodlands Rebel Base

Status: Dispossessed

Deep in worried thought, Gordon kicked aimlessly at the box by his feet. Alyx pretended to be busy, cleaning her gun, but then she holstered it and sat on another box. "Feeling down?"

"Yeah."

Alyx nodded and looked down at the floor, crossing her arms. "Maybe because Barney's coming up like a gopher with a million holes and then going down again? Pfft. Maybe he's in the deep blackness under the earth at this very moment, wondering which hole he should come out of next."

Gordon was for some reason very intrigued by her choice of words. _In the deep blackness._ Maybe the G-Man was real. Eli had met himâ€|maybeâ€|

"Gordonâ€|Vortigaunts." Alyx pointed at the door.

Gordon turned to look as the lanky aliens strode through the door towards them. They seemed hesitant, glancing at one another before the one in front splayed his hands outwards in a sign of peace. "We would speak with the Freeman."

"Yes?"

The Vortigaunt's big red eye blinked. "Weâ€|we travel in the other world, the deep darkness." Gordon started. "We can see and hear much that happens there. It does not command us, nor we itâ€|it is just there. We saved the Freeman, and the Alyx Vance. Always, we can hear the Freeman's footsteps echoing in the deep darkness. That is how we found him. Now he travels there no more. We hear another's footsteps, and wonder, wonder if it should not be so, as the Freeman's footsteps should not have been so. We hear the Barney Calhoun."

"Barney?" Alyx cried, standing up. "Did you hear that, Gordon?" She looked excited, trusting the Vortigaunts to save Barney as they had saved her. Gordon stood up beside her. "Can you bring him back?" He asked urgently.

The Vortigaunt twisted his hands nervously. "No."

"What do you mean no?" Alyx crossed her arms worriedly.

"The beingâ€|who had the Freeman. He knows now what we do. He guards the Barney Calhoun from us. We can hear him, but we cannot see him."

"Who's 'the being'?" Alyx asked, turning to Gordon with a confused look.

Gordon had no desire to explain. He addressed the Vortigaunts. "Is there any way you can bypass him?"

The Vortigaunts' heads swayed as they looked at each other, talking in their minds. Finally, the leader responded. "It is possible for us to predict the Calhoun's path, and where he will land next. His moves, his deedsâ€|they echo even now in the deep darkness. We must be there, waiting for him. The Freeman and the Vance are entwined, their lives fastened together. They are entwined with the Calhoun as well, but not the same, not the same. Still, it should be close enough. We can take him and hold off the being, maybe."

"Should? Maybe? There's a chance you can't?"

"It is hard, trying this at allâ€|a calling, that is the name. But a calling must be done between those whose lives are intertwined. The Freeman and the Vance are close, very close to the Calhoun. Butâ€|there is a closer one."

Gordon snapped his fingers. "Lauren!"

Alyx stared at him. "Barney's got a girl? Barney?"

Gordon nodded. "Believe it or not, he doesâ€|or did. He told me about her at Black Mesa. Hasn't he mentioned her since?"

Alyx frowned, shaking her head. "I've never even heard of her. If I was Barney's girl, I'd leave him in a fit after the first few nights he comes back with a hole in him. He always comes back with a hole in him."

"The holeâ€|yes, a hole. There is a hole in the Calhoun, one he has never been able to fill." The Vortigaunt spoke up.

"Of our original circle of close friends at Black Mesa, onlyâ€|" Gordon glanced at Alyx, "only Dr. Kleiner is alive. He'd know."

Subject: Gordon Freeman

Location: Woodlands Rebel Base

Status: Dispossessed

"Lauren? Well Gordon, wellâ€|I believe Barney and Lauren lost contact after the Seven Hour War. I'm not surprised, as the first thing the Combine did was to destroy communications. After that, Barney was much too busy to go and look for her." Dr. Kleiner taped some papers together. "I don't know if she died or not. Barney never even spoke her name again except when we were experimenting with the transport. He named the cat Lauren."

Alyx moaned. "You mean the one that came back allâ€|allâ€|" She waved a hand helplessly.

"That's the one!" Kleiner nodded. "I could have told Barney he had no stomach for scientific biology."

"Ok. So we have no clue where Lauren is?" Gordon turned the topic back to business.

"No."

"Well then we'll have to try without her. Vortigaunts, go ahead and track him. Where's Barney headed?"

The Vortigaunts grouped hands. After a few seconds, they began to shake and tremble. Minutes later, the leader turned to Gordon. "The being has sent the Calhoun to the land of Virginia. The Rebel forces are moving, a week from now."

"Talk about planning in advance." Alyx laughed. "Let's go!"

Subject: Gordon Freeman

Location: Hemish, Virginia

Status: Dispossessed

Gordon smashed through the Combine forces. Short on ammo, he used the gravity gun to suck up anything not nailed down and shoot it into the enemy. All the while, he kept an eye out for Alyx and an eye out for Barney.

They were fighting in an open village square. Above them, a Dropship was circling, nailing down groups of Resistance with its heavy plasma barrage. Gordon cursed and wished for a missile.

As if to gratify that wish, he heard the familiar whistle of one and looked up in time to see it coursing through the sky. It smashed into the Dropship and black smoke began to billow from its engine.

A second followed the first. When a third didn't come, Gordon got worried and tried to find where the shots had come from.

"Gordon! The meeting hall!" He heard Alyx call. He immediately looked and saw sparks coming out of a window. And then an explosion as fire waved from the room inside.

With a nasty suspicion, Gordon grabbed up a pack of shotgun shells and used his AUX power to sprint quickly through the lines, break down the door, and race up the stairs. It was littered with Combine bodies.

He ran up the stairs, pausing only to kill a stray headcrab. He reached the top landing, cocked his weapon, and broke down the door.

The room was pretty blackened by the explosions, with the shards of the explosive barrels still flaming. A chest of missiles was standing by the wall, and Gordon saw a figure at the window, slumped a bit against the frame, wearing Combine armor.

It was Barney.

He was shakily trying to extend his missile launcher through the window, while his bloody arms were trembling with fatigue and what looked like a plasma bullet embedded in his shoulder.

His face was bloody and just as dirty and unshaven as Gordon remembered him, saying goodbye to them over four months ago. But the familiar sparkle was in his eyes as his face went from surprised to

overjoyed, and then to guarded. He grinned sheepishly.

Gordon went to him wordlessly, took the missile launcher from him, eased him against the ground, and finished the Dropship himself.

He then put the launcher down and knelt by Barney, examining his wounds. "You're an idiot, you know that? Using a grenade near explosive barrels?" He scolded, for loss of anything else to say.

Barney shrugged; an action he clearly found painful. "Just one of my days." He suddenly grabbed Gordon's wrist. "I know now. How long have I been gone?"

Gordon met his gaze solemnly. "Four months."

"Jehosaphats. Only been a week or so for me. A looong week."

Alyx came pounding through the door, several Rebels on her heels. She saw Barney and Gordon, and immediately hoisted her gun. She knelt on the other side, ripping out a medkit, hiding her elation under anger. "You're a total idiot, Barney Calhoun. You used a grenade near explosive barrels?"

Barney didn't shrug again. He just looked at Gordon helplessly.

Gordon knew what he was thinking. He didn't want to get attached again, only to say goodbye. Like Gordon, Barney had come to know and fear the G-Man's power of ripping you out of the waking world.

A faint cheering came from outside. Gordon grabbed Alyx's hand and wrapped it around Barney's. "Don't let go of him, no matter what. Don't even look away, if possible. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Hemish, Virginia

Status: Employed

Along with the pain in his body, Barney felt torn by a longing to stay here, holding Alyx's hand, feeling the wood and plaster and smelling guns and smoke. Bad as it was, it was still reality.

In the G-Man's world, he barelyâ€¦could think or doâ€¦anything. That was all he could say about it. He felt like a mouse in a cage there, and hated it. And he hated the idea that he could come back in the future and Alyx and Gordon would be old and weak, or dead, or that he could maybe come back in one hundred years and everything would be changed.

He watched in uncomfortable silence as Alyx ministered to his burns. It was awkward for her to do it one handed. When she finger prodded the plasma bolt, he let out a hiss. When she immediately got worried, he tried to alleviate the tension.

"Lemme seeâ€¦what have I forgottenâ€¦sorry, no candy." He grinned.

To his surprise, Alyx just told him sharply to shut up. Just as suddenly, she turned her face away and violently scrubbed at it. Her shoulders began to shake.

Barney tried to sit up straighter and reached his good arm out to her, stroking her shoulder. "Hey, Alyx, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything."

She turned and, with a few stray tears on her cheeks, hit him hard in the chest with a huge hug. Face hidden in his bloody, ripped Combine armor, she let out the anxiety of the past few weeks. "Oh Barney—Barney I was so worried! First my father and then I thought you— and maybe Gordon—" She broke into crying a moment before containing herself. "This was just—no fun. You're gonna kill whoever you marry, coming back from the dead all the time!"

Barney chuckled mirthlessly, returning the hug as best he could with one arm. "I'm sorry, Alyx. I didn't want to do it. Wasn't my fault, this time. I swear." Feeling the normally unshakable Alyx shaking in his arms, he hated the G-Man all the more. But then he remembered what she said. "What was that about Eli?"

Before Alyx could answer, he felt a strange sensation in the back of his neck as Gordon ran in, followed by four Vortigaunts. Without saying a word, they swiftly but firmly move Barney to the center of the room, where he was forced to lie flat.

"Hey! Wha—what's happening?" He couldn't help exclaiming, feeling a bit helpless. The four Vortigaunts stood around him and stretched out their palms to each other, forming a circle. Alyx and Gordon put a hand on a Vortigaunt's shoulder. Barney tried again. "Ok. Do I really need to tell you how freaked out I am now?"

"Not really. You always look freaked out." Gordon grinned. Alyx kicked him in the leg from where she was standing. She looked down at Barney. "We're saving you from the being who took Gordon. Don't ask me any more, cause I don't know anymore."

"Aww figwit." Was all Barney could say, as everyone closed their eyes except him. He didn't really need to, as everything went black and he felt that strange helpless sensation.

But he noticed, with a surge of sudden joy and fear, he wasn't alone again.

Glowing almost, he saw Alyx and Gordon standing a few feet away. The four Vortigaunts were standing a ways in front of him, leaning forward, hands out, a sort of green shielding blossoming in their fingers.

Standing before them, looking the very picture of rage, the G-Man stood straight and stern, not even showing the strain the Vortigaunts were. His voice echoed. "Mr. Freeman—oh, my friends, this won't—do. My—employers—looked upon the—defection of Mr. Freeman with good will...but it can't happen more than once—it would be very bad for—business. I give you a chance to—leave."

"Not without Barney!" Gordon called defiantly. For some reason,

Barney couldn't say a word. He was mute. Why was it that whenever Barney wanted to say something sensible, he got tongue-tied?

"Mr. Calhoun is under myâ€¦employment. He is hardly yourâ€¦concern."

"We forced you back once and we can do it again. You're not the all-powerful god you pretend to be!" Gordon retorted.

"Hardly. I'm sorry, but ourâ€¦policies demand a specialâ€¦procedure for suchâ€¦conditions. I am very sorry, Mr. â€¦Calhoun."

In a split instant, Barney felt unbearable pain run up his body so fast that he almost went into a seizure. He could barely breath, yet was unable to collapse. He was held rigid by the pain, as if every tiny muscle cell inside him was being ripped apart.

"The Calhoun is fading! Call him!" A Vortigaunt's voice echoed.

"Barney! Barney! Come on!" Alyx called urgently, holding her hands out to him.

"Barney! Over here! You can make it!" Gordon, holding his hands out.

Barney obeyed stupidly, barely able to think beyond the pain. One footstep he took, one only. Like stepping into electricity. He gave a moan and couldn't move any further.

"The Calhoun is almost gone. We are not strong enough!"

It was true. Barney began to blink, literally. His whole body blinked into blackness.

Seeing him waver and fade, Alyx screamed.

**to be continued**

4. Chapter 4

**Author's notes: Yes, FINALLY, I get myself back to work and push up the last chapter on this very enjoyable story that I loved writing. Thank you so much for your kind comments, namely KRSONMar, JbearInChief, and Vypress! May the force be with you! (And yes, I'm also sorry this is such a short, chunked up ending...that's just how the story was meant to be. I also wrote it a while ago, and I flatter myself that my skills have somewhat improved. Thanks all, again!)

Subject: Unidentified

Location: Hemish, Virginia

Status: N/A

The Resistance member pushed through the crowd and stopped to stare at the hulking group of alien Vortigaunts. Gingerly, she peered through the bodies to see what was between them, gave a wordless gasp

at the sight, reeled, and touched a Vortigaunt's calf with one hand. Instantly, her body went rigid and her eyes closed.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Hemish, Virginia

Status: Employed

"Barneyâ€|" A new voice. Barely interested, feeling like he was falling sideways, Barney opened his heavy eyes. "Yeah?"

"What are you doing here, you dweeb? Give me your hand." A hand.

Barney grabbed it, and, as if he was a child, felt himself pulled up. Next minute, Gordon and Alyx grabbed him, pummeling him around the shoulders in a triumphant sort of group hug.

The well known voice still managed to send a chill up his spine. "Youâ€|.punyâ€|ahem. My temper is not lost. I must express myâ€|disappointment over suchâ€|childishness."

"Childishness? He hasn't even seen me drunk yet!" Barney spoke, surprised and relieved and feeling somewhat drunk anyway.

Gordon shook him a little. "Be quiet. You owe ME a beer, remember?"

"The Calhoun has been called. The circle is reformed." The Vortigaunts chanted.

A blast of whiteness,

And silence.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Hemish, Virginia

Status: Dispossessed

"So you're Lauren?" _Alyx._

"Nice to meet you." _Gordon._

"Yeah, nice to meet you too." Barney mumbled, pulling his eyelids open with effort, finding himself unable to sit up from where he was propped. Someone snorted at his comment.

Lauren came to his rescue, pulling him up while propping some stray packs behind him. He smiled stupidly at her. She was already 37, but just as beautiful to him as that day on the hill.

"So Barney, where's my flowers?" She smiled at him, one hand squeezing his good one.

"Flowers? After all that's happened, you want flowers?" Barney was partly incredulous, partly teasing. He felt a bit mentally inferior at the moment.

She laughed. "You never change. I don't see you for twenty years, find you lying dead in the middle of a group of Vortigaunts, and you complain about me wanting a few flowers that you promised me twenty years ago?"

"A lifetime ago. Good to see you, sweetheart."

She answered him with a kiss. Barney blushed as he realized who was watching. "Well?" He barked at Gordon and Alyx, who were both grinning. "Why don't you find some other room and do it yourselves?"

"Barney!" Alyx growled back. "Don't even suggest that. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"You see Barney, she's finally realized you can't be trusted to take care of yourself." Gordon laughed.

"I got Lauren back!"

"Who got who?" Lauren slapped him in the arm.

He grinned back at her. "You wouldn't have come if I hadn't died."

Lauren rolled her eyes. She used a medkit to take away some of the scars and the gash on his forehead where a shard of metal had hit him. "Well, good to see you too. What have you been doing with what you call your life? And where'd you get the uniform?"

"Long story. How about we start totally from scratch and pretend it's twenty years ago?"

"Can't. There's Zombies and Combine all over the world, or have you noticed?"

At the word Combine, Gordon jumped up. "That's right. We've got to get out of here. A second defense wave is coming."

Alyx stood. "What about Barney? Ohâ€¦." She smiled down at him evilly.

Barney understood only too well. "Hey Alyxâ€¦no, youâ€¦you wouldn't do that to me, would ya?" He whined.

Alyx signalled two Resistance members to carry Barney. "Outside. Dog will take good care of you."

"Good care of me? Have you seen him jump fifty feet onto a Dropship on a mere whim? He's gonna kill me!" Barney protested.

"Really? One would think you weren't worried about getting killed, the lifestyle you lead." Alyx said dryly.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: United Nations Hall, New York

Status: Dispossessed

Fully healed and feeling like a million bucks, Barney dodged Combine bullets as he hurriedly carried the Sentry gun, lugging it over dead bodies and blown up ditches to position it in range of the Combine enemy.

He made it back to the barricade and flung himself over. Lauren handed him his gun. "There's a report that the Combine are withdrawing from sector 8. They're all clustering here as a last defence."

"Maybe we'll finally end this war." Barney took the gun and fired at another rolling explosive can, before it came too close to the Resistance line. Beside him, Lauren threw a grenade that blew up a small, hiding trio of Combine who tried to sneak too close to the Sentinel Gun.

"Hey, you didn't tell me you had those!" Barney cried.

"I want to stay alive, that's why."

"Are you guys never going to let me forget that?" He pulled her down as a missile zoomed overhead.

"Nope." Lauren grinned.

A few hours later, it happened. Suddenly, the Combine Transhuman forces gave up. Dropping their weapons and coming out into the open. Less than forty were left.

A loud rumbling built up as Dr. Kleiner appeared on the giant public screen, his thin face beaming. Barney remembered sharply how he had stood here last time, listening as Dr. Breene broadcasted the dooming message of Earth's slavery. Now, he would hear the saving message of Earth's freedom. He climbed up onto the barricade.

"Attention, Freedom Fightersâ€¦I'm making this brief. Thanks to you, your support, your struggles, and most of all your sacrifices, you have achieved your goal. The Combine have surrendered and retreated back into space.

"Earth is free!"

Dr. Kleiner would have said more, but the rumble, which had been the choking excitement in everyone's throats, burst out into a flood of whoops and screams and cheers. "Way to go, Doc!" Barney roared, bending only to pull Lauren up beside him and hug her to him. Together, the two raised their weapons and cheered.

And Earth was free.

Subject: Barney Calhoun

Location: Anderson, South Carolina

Status: Dispossessed

Barney sat on the grass, with Lauren by his side. Neither of them spoke. Sure, the sky was a lot less clear than it should have been. (Dr. Kleiner and a dozen others were working on a solution to this)

And the lake below was a bit lower. The grass was somewhat brown and prickly, and the tree was gone.

But to Barney and Lauren, as they looked in each other's eyes, it was twenty years ago. They were silent, just looking at each other. And then, finally, "You know, we'd better get married soon if we want kids."

Barney nodded. "Sooner the better. Gordon has a twenty years start on me."

Lauren frowned. "You might race Gordon through airvents but you're not racing him with our kids!"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Barney smiled, touching her cheek and grinning as the frown on Lauren's face went away. "World's changed a lot, hasn't it. We've changed too."

"Not too much." Lauren insisted.

"Yeah. Maybe we won't live to see the Earth as it once was. Maybe even Gordon and Alyx won't. But it doesn't really matter. Cause I've got you."

"Oh, Barney." Lauren leaned into his arms. "You can say a lot with so little."

"Funny. I used to try and say a little with a lot." Barney grinned.

There was silence a little bit longer, as the sun finally set and a chilly breeze rose up. Barney suddenly noticed something and bent over. He pulled up his hand and held it before them.

Just then, the polluted clouds shifted, and the stars peeked out as the full moon looked down. The white light fell directly on Barney's hand, revealing a dandelion. Perhaps the first flower ever seen on that hill since the Combine had ravaged it.

Lauren's hand closed over his, over the dandelion. She looked up at him, the stars reflected in her eyes. "You dweeb." She breathed lovingly.

They kissed.

FINIS

End
file.